

# The LION'S SHARE

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The Detective Had Interposed a Stalwart Leg.

## SYNOPSIS.

The story opens at Harvard where Col. Rupert Winter, U. S. A., visiting, saw the suicide of young Mercer. He met Cary Mercer, brother of the dead student. Three years later, in Chicago, in 1906, Col. Winter overheard Cary Mercer apparently planning to kidnap Archie, the colonel's ward, and to gain possession of Aunt Rebecca Winter's millions. A Miss Smith was mentioned, apparently as a conspirator. Winter unexpectedly met a relative, Mrs. Melville Melville, who told him that his Aunt Rebecca, Archie and the latter's nurse, Miss Janet Smith, were to leave for the west with the colonel and Mrs. Melville. A great financial magnate was aboard the train on which Col. Winter met his Aunt Rebecca, Miss Smith and Archie. He sat his orderly, Sergt. Haley, to watch over Cary Mercer. Col. Winter learned that the financial magnate is Edwin S. Keatcham. On approaching Cary Mercer, the colonel was snubbed. Winter, aided by Archie, cleverly frustrated a hold-up on the train. He took a great liking to Miss Smith, despite her alleged connection with the kidnapping plot, which he had not yet revealed to his relatives. The party arrived in San Francisco. It was thought that there were big persons behind the hold-up gang. Archie mysteriously disappeared. Fruitless search was conducted for Archie. Blood in a near-by room at the hotel caused fears for the boy's life. No headway was made in the search for Archie. The lad's voice was heard over the telephone, however, and a minute later a woman's voice—that of Miss Smith. Col. Winter and a detective set out for the empty mansion, owned by Arnold, a Harvard graduate.

## CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

His employer's satire did not even flick the dust off Birdsell's complacency; he grinned cheerfully. "Oh, I'm not so bad as that; I don't suppose she did kill the boy; I think he's alive; all right. But say, colonel, I'll give it to you straight; I do think the senora coaxed the boy off. You admit, don't you, he went off. Well, then he was coaxed, somehow. Now, who's got influence enough to coax him? You cross out the maid; so do I. You cross out Mrs. Melville Winter; so do I. I guess we both cross out the old lady. Well, there's you and the senora left. I don't suspect you, general."

"Really? I don't see why. I stand to make more than anybody else, if you are digging up motives. And how about the chambermaid?"

Birdsell flashed a glance of reproach on his companion. "Now, colonel, do you think I ain't looked her up? First thing. Nothing in it. Decent Vermont girl, three years in the hotel. Came for her lungs. She ain't in it. But let's get back to Miss Smith. Did you know she is Cary Mercer's sister-in-law?"

He delivered his shot in a casual way, and the colonel took it stonily; nevertheless, it went to the mark. Birdsell continued: "Now, question is, was Mercer the secretary? You didn't see the man in the elevator, except his back. Had he two moles?"

"I couldn't see. He had different clothes; but still there was something like Mercer about the shoulders."

"Burney didn't get a chance to take a snapshot, but he did snap the stove man. Here it is. Pull that book out of my pocket."

Obedient, the colonel lifted a couple of small prints which he scrutinized intently, at the end admitting: "Yes, it is he all right. Now, do you know what I think?"

Birdsell couldn't form an idea.

"I think the Keatcham party is in it; and I think they are after bigger game than Archie. Maybe the train robbers were a part of the scheme—although I'm not so sure of that."

"Oh, the robbers were in it all right. But now come to Miss Smith; where does she come in? Or are you as sure of her as Mercer was in Chicago?"

If he had expected to get a spark out of the Winter tinder by this scolding stroke, he was mistaken; the soldier did not even move his brooding gaze fixed on the hills beyond the house roofs; and he answered in a level tone: "Did you get that story from my aunt, or was it Mrs. Melville? I'm pretty certain you got your biography from that quarter. My aunt might have told her."

"That would be betraying a lady's confidence. I'm only a detective, whose business is to pry, but I never go back on the ladies. And I think, same's you, that the lady in question is a real nice, high-toned lady; but I can't disregard the evidence. I never give out my system, but I've got one, all the same. Look here, see this paper?"—he had replaced the envelope in his pocket; he pulled it out again; or, rather, so the colonel fancied, until Birdsell turned the envelope over, revealing it to be blank. "There's a sheet of paper inside; take it out. Look at the water-mark, look at the pattern; then compare it with this letter"—handing the colonel the original envelope. "Same exactly, ain't they?"

The colonel, who had studied the two sheets of paper silently, nodded as silently; and he had a premonition of Birdsell's next sentence before it came. "Well, Mrs. Melville Winter, this morning, took me to Miss Smith's desk, where we found this and a lot more like it."

"You seem to be right in thinking the paper widely distributed," observed the colonel.

"And you don't think that suspicious?"

"I should think it more suspicious if the paper were not out on her desk. If she is such a deep one as you seem to think, she would hide such an incriminating bit of evidence."

"She didn't know we suspected her. Of course, you haven't shadowed her a little bit?"

"There is a limit to detective duty in the case of a gentleman," returned the colonel, haughtily. "I have not."

Little Birdsell sighed; then in a propitiatory tone: "Well, of course, we both think there are other people in the job; I don't know exactly what you mean by bigger game, but I can make a stagger at it. Now, say, did you get any answer when you wrote to Keatcham himself?"

"Yes," said the colonel, grimly. "I heard. You know the sort of letter I wrote; telling him of our dreadful anxiety and about the lad's being an orphan; don't you think it was the sort of letter a decent man would answer, no matter how busy he might be?"

"Sure. Didn't you get an answer?"

"I did." The colonel extricated himself from his wrappings enough to find a pale blue envelope, which he handed to Birdsell, at the same time taking the motor handle. "You see; type-written, very polite, chilly sort of letter, kind to make a man hot under the collar and swear at Keatcham's heartlessness. Mr. Keatcham unable to answer, having been ill since he left San Francisco. Did not see anything of any boy. Probably ran away. Has no information of any kind to afford. And the writer is very sincerely mine. The minute I read it I was sure Mercer wrote it; and he wrote it to make me so disgusted with Keatcham I wouldn't pursue the subject with him. Just the same way he snubbed my aunt; and, for that matter, just the way he tried to snub me on the train. But he missed his mark; I wired every hotel in Santa Barbara and every one in Los Angeles; and Keatcham isn't there and hasn't been there. He has a big bunch of mail at Santa Barbara waiting for him, forwarded from Los Angeles, but he hasn't shown himself."

Birdsell shot a glance of cordial admiration at the colonel. "You're all there, general," he cried with unquenchable familiarity. "I've been trying to call up the Keatcham outfit, and I couldn't get a line, either. They haven't used the tickets they bought—their reservations went empty to Los Angeles. Now, what do you make out of that?"

"I make out that Archie is only part of their game," replied the soldier. "Now see, Birdsell, you are not going to get a couple of rich young college fellows to do just plain kidnapping and searing women out of their money—" "Lord, general," interrupted Birdsell, "those college guys don't turn a hair at kidnapping; they regularly steal the president of the freshman class, and the things they do at their hazing bees and initiations would make an Apache Indian sit up and take notice. I tell you, general, they're the limit for devilry."

"Some kinds. Not that kind; it's too dirty. Arnold was one of the cleanest football players at Harvard. And I don't know anything about human nature if that other youngster isn't decent. But Mercer—es un loco; you can look out for anything from him. Now, see the combination. Arnold was at Harvard! I have traced the motor car they used to him; and then, if you add that his father is away safe in Europe and he has an empty house, off to one side, with a quantity of space around it and the reputation of being haunted, why—"

"It looks good to me. And I understand my men have got around it to the quiet all right. How's your man Haley got on, hiring out to the Jap in charge?"

"Well enough; the Jap took him on to mow, but either Mr. Caretaker doesn't know anything or he won't tell. He's bubbling over with conversation about the flowers and the country and the Philippines, where he used to be; but he only knows that the honorable family are all away and he is to shun the house. Aren't we almost there?"

"Just around the corner. I guess when you see it you'll think it's just the patio a spook of taste would freeze to."

"Why is it haunted?"

"Now you have me. I ain't on to such dream stuff. Gimme five cards. Mrs. Arnold died off in Europe, so 'tain't her; and the house has only been built two years; but the neighbors have seen lights and heard groans and a pick chopping at the stones. Some folks say the land belonged to an old miner and he died before he could tell where he'd buried his mazuma; so he is taking a little buscar after it. There's the house, general."

The street climbed a gentle hill, and on its crest a large house, in mission style, looked over a pleasant land. Its position on a corner and the unusual size of the grounds about it gave the mansion an effect of space. Of almost rawly recent erection though it was, the kindly climate had so fostered the growth of the pines, acacias and live-oaks, the eucalypti and the orange-trees, which made a rich blur of color on the hillside, had so lavishly tended the creeping ivies and Bougainvilleas which masked the rounded lantern arches of the stern gray facade, and so sumptuously blazoned the flower beds in the garden on the one hand, yet, on the other, had so cunningly dulled the greenish gray of the cobblestones from California arroyos in chimney and foundation, and had so softly streaked the marble of the garden statues and the plaster of walls and mansion with tiny filaments of lichens or faint green moss, that the beholder might fancy the house to be the ancient home of some Spanish hidalgos, handed down with a hereditary curse, through generations, to the last of his race. One was tempted to such a flutter of fancy because of the impression given by the mansion. A sullen reticence hung about the place. The windows, for the most part, were heavily shuttered. Not a pane of glass flashed back at the sunlight; even those casements so, shuttered turned

blank dark green shades, like bandaged eyes, on the court and the beautiful terraces and the lovely sweep of hillside where the wonderful shadows swayed and melted.

The bent figure of a man raking, distorted by the perspective, was visible just beyond the high pillars of the gateway. He paid no attention to the motions of the motor car, nor did he answer a hail until it was repeated. Then he approached the car. Birdsell was in the roadway trying to unlock the gate. The man, whose Japanese features were quite distinguishable, bowed; he explained that the honorable owners were not at home; his insignificant self was the only keeper of the grounds. He spoke sufficiently good English with the accompaniment of a deprecatory, amiable smile. Birdsell, in turn, told him that his own companion was a very great gentleman from the east who belonged to a society of vast power which was investigating spectral appearances, and that he had come thousands of miles to see the ghost.

The Japanese extended both hands, while the appeal of his smile deepened. "Too bad, velly," he murmured, "but not leally any g'lost, no nev?" "Don't you believe in the ghost?" asked Col. Winter.

"No, me Chistian boy, no believe no'ings."

"All the same," said the colonel, laboriously swinging himself from his vantage-ground of the motor seat to the flat top of the wall, thence dropping to the green sward below, "allee samee, like go in house hunt ghost." He cracked a bank note in the palm of the slim brown hand, smiling and nodding as if to break the force of his brusque action. Meanwhile, Birdsell had safely shut off his engine before he placed himself beside the others with an agility hardly to be expected of his rotund build.

As for the caretaker, whether because he perceived himself outnumbered, or because he was really void of suspicion, he accepted the money with outward gratitude and proffered his guidance through the garden and the orchards. He slipped into the role of cicerone with no atom of resistance; he was voluble; he was gracious; he was artlessly delighted with his seniors. In spite of this flood of suavity, however, there seemed to be no possibility of persuading him to admit them to the house.

Assured of this, the two fell back for a second, time for the merest eye-flash from the detective to the soldier, who at once limped briskly up to the Jap, saying: "We are very much obliged to you; this is a beautiful house, beautiful gardens; but we want to see the ghost; and if you can give me young Mr. Arnold's address I will see him—or write, and we can come back."

The gardener, with many apologies and smiles, did not know Mr. Arnold's honorable address, but he drew out a soiled card, explaining that it bore the name of the gentleman in charge of the property. Birdsell, peeping over the Jap's shoulders, added that it was the card of a well-known legal firm.

"Then," said the colonel with deliberation, "we will thank you again for your courtesy, and—what's that?"

The Jap turned; they all started at the barking detonation of some explosion; while they gazed about them there came another booming sound, and they could see smoke pouring from the chimney and leaking through the window joints of a room in the rear of the house. Like a hare, not breaking his wind by a single cry, the Jap sped toward the court. The others were hard on his heels, though the colonel limped and showed signs of distress by the time they reached the great iron door.

The Jap pulled out a key; he turned it and swung the door barely wide enough to enter, calling on them to stay out; he would tell them if he needed them.

"Augustus stay; maybe honorable t'leves!" he cried.

But the detective had interposed a stalwart leg and shoulder. Instantly the door swung open; he acted as if he had lost his wits with excitement. "You're burning up! Lord! you're burning! Fire! Fire!" he bawled, and rushed boldly into the room.

Winter followed him, also calling aloud in a strident voice. And it was to be observed, being such an unusual preparation for a conflagration, that he had drawn a heavy revolver and ran with it in his hand. Before he jumped out of the car he had discarded his thick top-coat and all his wrappings.

An observer, also (had there been one near), would have taken note of a robust Irishman, who had been weeding the flower-beds, and would have seen him straighten at the first peal of the explosion, stare wildly at the chimneys before any distinct smoke was to be seen, then run swiftly and climb up to a low chimney on a wing of the house, watering-pot in hand. He would have seen him empty his inadequate fire extinguisher and rapidly descend the ladder, while the smoke volleyed forth, as if defying his puny



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efforts; later, he would have seen the watering-pot bearer pursue the others into the house, emitting noble yells of "Fire!" and "Help!"

Further, this same observer, had he been an intimate friend of Sergt. Dennis Haley, certainly would have recognized that resourceful man of war in the amateur fireman.

## CHAPTER VIII. Face to Face.

When the two men got into the house the dim rooms made them stumble for a moment after the brilliant sunshine of the outer skies; but in a second Birdsell's groping hand had found an electric push-button and the room was flooded with light. They were in a small office off the kitchen, apparently. Smoke of a peculiarly pungent odor and eye-smarting character blurred all the surroundings; but during the moment the Jap halted to explore its cause the others perceived two doors and made for them. One was locked, but the other must have been free to open, since Haley, with his watering-can, bounded through it while they were tugging at the other. Almost immediately, however, Haley was back again shouting and pointing down the dark passage.

"The fire's there," screamed the detective. "I can smell smoke! The smoke comes through the keyhole!" But while the Jap fitted a key in the lock and swung back the door, and Haley, who had paused to replenish his watering-can at a convenient faucet, darted after the other two, the colonel stood listening with every auditory nerve strained to catch some sound. He yelled "Fire! help!" at the top of his voice, but not moving a muscle. "Too far off," he muttered, then he yelled again and threw a heavy chair as if he had stumbled against it. Another pause; he got down on his knees to put his ear to the floor. Directly he rose; he did not speak, but the words that he said to himself were only: "Just possible. Some one down cellar; but not under here." Meanwhile he was hurrying in pursuit of the others as swiftly as his stiff knee would allow. He found them in a side hall with tiled or brick floor, gathered about a water-soaked heap of charred red paper.

"'Tis terrible!" announced Haley; "a bum for sure! a dinnermate bum!"—fishing out something like a tin tomato can from the sodden mass.

"Anyhow, there goes the real thing," observed the colonel, coolly, as a formidable explosion jarred the air. "If you blow us up, I kill you first!" blazed the Jap, and his knife flashed.

"Chito, Chito!" soothed the colonel, lifting his revolver almost carelessly. Simultaneously two brawny arms pinioned the Jap's own arms at his sides.

"Shure, Mister Samural, 'tis the ongrateful chap youse is," expostulated Haley. "I hate to restrain ye, but if ye thry any jehujits on me 'twill be sahanara wid youse mighty quick."

"No understan," murmured the Jap, plaintively. "Why you hait me?" "Come, put out the fire first," said

the colonel; "you know the house, you go ahead."

The Jap darted on ahead so swiftly that they had some ado to follow; which seemed necessary, since he might have clashed a bolt on them at any turn. The colonel's stiff leg kept in the rear, but Haley was never a hand's breadth behind the runner.

They found smoke in two places, but they easily extinguished the tiny flames. In both cases the bombs turned out to be no more dangerous than a common kind of fireworks yielding a suffocating smoke in an inclosure, but doing no special damage on safe and fire-proof ground, like a hearth. They were quickly extinguished. In their search they passed from one luxurious room to another, the Jap leading, until he finally halted in a spacious library hung in Spanish leather, with ancient, richly carved Spanish tables and entrancing Spanish chairs of turned wood and age-mellowed cane, and bookcases sumptuously tempting a book-lover. But the colonel cared only for the soul of a book, not its body; the richest and clearest of black letter or the daintiest of tooling had left him cold; moreover, every fiber in him was strung by his quest; and Haley, naturally, was immune; strangely enough, it was the cheerful, vulgar little detective who gave a glance, rapid but full of admiration, at the shelves and pile of missals on the table, incongruously jostled by magazines of the day.

Winter faced the Jap, who was sheathed again in his bland and impassive politeness. "Where is Mr. Mercer?" said he.

The Jap waved his hands in an eloquent oriental gesture. He assured the honorable questioner that he did not know any Mr. Mercer. There was no one in the house.

The colonel had seated himself in a priceless arm-chair in Cordova stamped leather; he no longer looked like an invalid. "Show your star, please," he commanded Birdsell, and the latter silently flung back the lapel of his coat.

"I ought to tell you," continued Rupert Winter, "that the game is up. It would do no good for you to run that poisoned bit of steel of yours into me or into any of us; we have only to stay here a little too long and the police of San Francisco will be down on you—oh, I know all about what sort they are, but we have money to spend as well as you. You take the note I shall write to Mr. Mercer, or whatever you choose to call him, and bring his answer. We stay here until he comes."

Having thus spoken in an even, gentle voice, he scribbled a few words on a piece of paper which he took out of his note-book. This he proffered to the Jap.

On his part, the latter kept his self-respect; he abated no jot of his assurance that they were alone in the house; he instigated his suspicion that they were there for no honest purpose; finally he was willing to search the house if they would stay where they were.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)